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Kößler, Reinhart

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Reinhart Kössler

## From Genocide to Holocaust? Structural parallels and discursive continuities

The memorial year of 2004 has given rise in Germany to a remarkable array of activities referring to the genocide which, a century earlier, the German *Schutztruppe* committed in present-day Namibia. Even though these activities<sup>1</sup> have reached a rather limited audience and, in this way, display a telling asymmetry in terms of public interest for commemorative activities in Namibia on the one hand and in Germany on the other, there has been a noticeable change in the thrust of at least some of the debate. After the quasi-official acknowledgement of the genocide by Minister Wieczorek-Zeul at the central commemorative event in Ohamakari, the issue of reparations certainly remains on the agenda. But the controversy surrounding genocide as such has been pushed to the margins much more than has previously been the case. A centre-right government likely to emerge from the general elections now planned for autumn, 2005, will hardly be able to retract on principle, while certainly being even more recalcitrant than its predecessor when it comes to material compensation. In scholarly debate, the picture is even less ambiguous and probably has been so for some time. Those concerned with the intellectual scene in Namibia, especially among the German speaking community, are certainly justified in being irritated by letters to the editors frequently printed in the *Allgemeine Zeitung* published in Windhoek and occasionally in its namesake published in Frankfurt on Maine, but they ought not forget that it would be a great mistake to take self-styled settler historians seriously, nor should they lose sight of the overwhelming consensus amongst serious scholars. However, as will be shown below, what we witness is a rather weak consensus.

The present exchange bears witness to this state of affairs. While raising vitally important issues, it does so on the common understanding that what happened in Namibia in 1904 was genocide, even though Henning Melber and Birthe Kundrus concern themselves with hardly identical subject matter. This can be understood in the light of earlier exchanges, as the issues raised by Kundrus are only mentioned in passing in Melber's paper, which rather

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1 For an overview, see Zeller 2005.

addresses the current politics of dealing with the memory of the genocide.<sup>2</sup> Still, the controversy mainly arises on account of the fact that anything which happened in Imperial or Weimar Germany, above all state sponsored mass crimes and atrocities, will inevitably be related to the vanishing point of Auschwitz. At the same time, this is all the more reason to treat the matter with the utmost seriousness. Therefore, while controversy should not cloud our view as to the extent of the underlying consensus, enabling us as it does to debate rather subtle points, we should also be aware of the weight and importance such points carry in viewing the history of mass crimes committed on an unimaginable scale during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the manifold consequences of those crimes – a subject which goes beyond the limits of the present discussion.

In the illuminating terms Birthe Kundrus has brought to the debate, the main issue concerns causal relationships between singular events as opposed to more general considerations on structural constellations. While the latter approximate the proposition of a social law, positing that certain conditions, in combination, are likely to bring about a particular outcome, the former suggest the idea of a definitive causal chain, established by documentary material, where one specific event leads to another, equally specific event. Obviously, this opposition relates to the venerable juxtaposition of nomothetic, as opposed to ideographic science, with much of social science traditionally weighted on the former side, the overwhelming majority of the historical guild on the latter. Of course, there are serious recent contributions that go well beyond this rather caricatured picture. Here, one need only point to Martin Shaw's (2003) forceful argument that any war, above all in its modern form, contains a tendency towards genocide that comes to the fore in a whole range of disconcerting forms. However, the present debate has already moved well beyond the dire issue of disciplinary divides, as attested by people from various fields who take quite divergent views. On the material side, Kundrus is right, of course, when insisting that causal relationships between the genocide in Namibia and the Nazi holocaust, in the sense she postulates, would still have to be established by far more detailed research. Yet should this keep us from posing questions about continuities, also in Kundrus' sense of the term? Her own argument answers to the contrary, since she formulates a whole array of such questions, although it is perhaps not that clear whether she considers it feasible to test them by in-depth research. These questions concern a *conscious* link between Nazi extermination policy and colonial practice; a direct transfer of structures of agency and patterns of apperception; and an enduring reduction of inhibitions against acting violently after the Herero-

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2 See also references listed in his bibliography, including our joint interventions in 2004.

German war. This is then juxtaposed with the more general features of colonialism and colonial war.

This latter point should prompt us to offer some background before we consider Kundrus' propositions on parallels and continuities. While it is of importance to insist on the common features of all forms of modern colonialism, since otherwise, we run the risk of rendering harmless the impacts of colonialism by singling out e.g., German colonialism (cf. on this, Kössler 2004), colonial war merits a closer look on two counts. First, the concept of genocide, in terms of the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, poses rather distinct conditions for an occurrence to be named as such. Besides the fact of mass crime perpetrated against a specific group, the central criterion is intent. According to this, it is strictly speaking incorrect, for instance, to refer to the Congo horrors or the transatlantic slave trade as genocides, regardless of the hecatombs of human lives they claimed. As scholars, we are called upon to use precise conceptual instruments rather than pass moral judgment and, above all, those instruments direct us to the social form or specific configurations of processes and occurrences. In terms of intent, the number of colonial genocides is, indeed, rather limited,<sup>3</sup> as opposed to wars where sometimes many more people were killed than in the war in Namibia 1904-08. Thus, we are in fact referred back to a closer look at the Namibian case and its relationship to the historical trajectory of Germany during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For the present purpose, I shall confine myself to pointing out two main features. The intention of annihilating Herero and also Nama in a sense far more devastating than any discussion about mere military defeat is evident, not only from von Trotha's infamous proclamation of October 2, 1904 (the so called shooting order) and its corollary directed against the Nama about half a year later (cf. *Kriegsgesch. Abt. 1907*: 186). This genocidal strategy was explicitly extolled as a glorious feat of German arms in the General Staff's official publication (cf. *Kriegsgesch. Abt. 1906*: chpt. 16). To this must be added the practice of the concentration camps which amounted to 'murder by neglect', in the context of a systematized and bureaucratic system (Zimmerer 2003: 63), the intentionality of which is also attested when Colonel von Deimling, as commander of the camp on Shark Island in Lüderitz harbour, explicitly stated his intention not to allow any 'Hottentot' leave the island alive (cf. Erichsen 2003: 84-5). The exterminatory thrust of this policy and of the trajectory of the German settlement project in Namibia (cf. Zimmerer 2001) is attested to by sufficient source material, not least such stemming from von Trotha's exchanges with Leutwein

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3 The instructive yearbook of the German holocaust centre (Fritz Bauer-Institut) contains accounts of some of the lesser well known 20<sup>th</sup> century cases, such as Spain in the Rif War or Italy in Libya and Ethiopia, remarkably with German participation of some kind or other; cf. Wojak & Meinl 2004.

and with his superiors in Berlin. When Kundrus writes that the German army merely assented more or less to a side effect of their strategy, she misses both the message of the sources and the content of a meaningful concept of genocide. One further important feature singles out the colonial war in Namibia from most other colonial wars (cf. Mann 2003: 25-6): On the side of the colonial power, it was fought not by colonial troops recruited somewhere in the region or in some other colony, but mainly by Germans, with up to 14,000 troops deployed (cf. Hillebrecht 2003: 128). In comparison to other instances of colonial war, this meant much more massive exposure to the war experience and substantial death toll among Germans. There is a further important contrast to the other murderous colonial war that took place almost at the same time in present-day Tanzania, then German East Africa: Whereas in East Africa, merely 15 Germans died, in South West Africa there were 2000 casualties (cf. Beez 2003: 103-4; Wimmelbücker 2005).

In view of this, what can be said about parallels and continuities? While the quest for further research and the plea for more detail and precision is a rather general one, the direction of ensuing research efforts would always be predicated on a more concrete set of hypotheses. Here, we have to ask ourselves not only whether we can answer Kundrus' questions but, more importantly, even whether she has asked the right questions or, at the very least, has exhausted the relevant questions. It is the latter point I would especially like to contest here. My impression is that while we may certainly not have a causally conclusive chain of evidence (can such ever be established in the study of historical/social developments?), we can point to many more links of such a chain than Kundrus seems to suggest. And it is the business of interpretive sociology (Max Weber) and, indeed, history as a hermeneutical discipline, to try and make sense of such discrete links or conceivably longer sections of a chain, and to reconstruct them. Inevitably, errors, ambiguities and the kind of debate we are engaged in form part and parcel of such business.

Linkages of the kind suggested exist on a whole number of quite diverse levels and fields. Take military strategy, where Isabel Hull has pointed out the central importance of the idea of the final decisive battle in Prusso-German strategic thinking which, stemming from the experience of the battle of Sedan, in 1870, informed von Trotha's actions before 11 August, 1905. The same is true for the pursuit of the defeated, but not militarily annihilated Herero into the Omaheke, or indeed the planning of von Schlieffen for a future European war, who at the same time was von Trotha's superior in Berlin. According to Hull, this does not just suggest a linkage to World War I with respect to military thinking, but more importantly, links up with the various concepts of final solution which, she stresses, ought to be carefully distinguished from atrocity and massacre (Hull 2003: 142). Such finality constitutes a destructively utopian policy in the sense of a conscious, universal goal: ... a total,

permanent end to a problem and applied to human society, ... the disappearance of the problem population (ib.: 143). Linked to this, in Hull's view, are certain peculiar traits of German military culture that joined the single battle of annihilation as a strategic lynchpin to that curious mix of ambition and desperation characteristic of Wilhelminian politics (ib.: 147, 148), to produce the attitude of hot pursuit. Such traits were conducive to the mass killings after the battle at Waterberg on August 11, 1904 and, finally, to the explicit goal of extermination in von Trotha's October 2 order and to the concentration camps. Hull carefully states that this was part of a pattern of possibilities; it was not an aberration (ib.: 161), which she sees confirmed by the carnage of the Maji Maji war which began in 1905 in German East Africa. We may add that obviously, such experiences reflecting the highest echelons of the military also fed back into the pattern of possibilities. Such considerations could then fuel an incipient debate revisiting some of the discussion on the German *Sonderweg* in the light of colonial experience. However, it seems clear that one should also distinguish between an almost inevitable positioning of what happened in the colonies, and in particular in Namibia, in the perspective of German history (Eckert 2003: 236) on the one hand, and looking first at the socially and historically grounded dispositions of the actors in the field and relating those to the issue of a persistent power of the German nobility vis-à-vis an aspiring and economically successful bourgeoisie, on the other (cf. Steinmetz 2005).

This perspective sketches a linkage between the colonial war at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the holocaust forty years later, that in contradistinction to the requirements Kundera posits for her concept of continuity does not necessarily rely on personal experience, nor actually on a linkage of concrete military practices rather than military thinking that also informs the frame of mind of a wider public, in other words, public discourse. I would like to give a few indications on the importance the colonial war seems to have had for the dynamics of German public discourse, in full cognizance that this, if any, is a field that still warrants intensive research.

If there is one feature that sets off the colonial war in German Southwest Africa from most, or even all, subsequent genocides of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is the astounding and appalling publicity given to the events by the perpetrators, apparently on virtually all levels. This begins by a host of photographs taken, and made into picture postcards of soldiers sent with greetings from afar and representing anything from concentration camps, over emaciated prisoners in chains to execution scenes.<sup>4</sup> A further aspect concerns the memorial volumes that were put out shortly after the event or even while the war was not yet officially over, which were also not shy in depicting overt crimes

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4 An impressive collection of these has been brought together by Joachim Zeller and the gist is displayed in the illustrations to Zimmerer & Zeller (2003: 53, 67, 128, 131).

against humanity, such as two German soldiers packaging a case of Herero skulls with a caption informing the readers that these had been cleaned of their flesh by Herero women using glass shards (cf. Zimmerer & Zeller 2003: 77). Yet a further component is influential novels that refer to the war, above all *Peter Moors Fahrt nach Südwest* (Frenssen 2002), an account of the experience of a young German trooper, couched in the form of an adventure novel, but transporting a whole array of colonial ideological mainstays, such as the superior right of the colonizers to an underused or even abused country, divine calling and above all the naturalizing of Africans represented as wild beasts rather than humans. The novel, translated into several languages, including English (cf. Brehl 2003: 88), sold more than 400,000 copies in Germany up to 1945 and became standard school reading in 1908, two years after publication (cf. Pakendorf 1987: 176). Lengthy portions of this novel have been incorporated into the *Blue Book* documenting, from the point of view of the South African occupying power, German malpractices in Namibia in 1918 (cf. Silvester & Gewald 2003: 111-3). One may wonder at the haste and lack of care of the compilers of the *Blue Book*, yet even more remarkable is the fact that a widely read youth novel and current school reading contained portions deemed suitable to document German colonial crimes and atrocities. This points to a rather pervasive process of trivialising such crimes in the public eye, letting them appear as everyday occurrences at least in far-off, if avowedly German places such as the colonies were. Such processes, I would like to suggest, may have spawned consequences at least as serious as military practice or personal continuities might have been. Yet this is not all that could be said about public discourse.

The extensive publishing activity on the colonial war in Germany cannot be dissociated from the major mobilisation of right wing civil society associated with the so-called Hottentot elections of 1907. It is not by accident that these elections to the Reichstag, the only ones before 1914 in which the Social Democrats lost a substantial number of seats (though not in the popular vote), are still known by a term referring explicitly to Namibia and more specifically, to the Nama-German war still going on at the time. The elections, originating in the dissolution of the Reichstag because of opposition from the Social Democrats and the Centre against proposed appropriations for the war effort, were contested by the right wing and centre parties in a new coalition (Bülow-Block ), and the campaign was marked by large-scale mobilisation of nationalist civil society organisations, bringing to the fore patriotic themes and in particular the colonial war where they claimed that the Social Democrats and the Centre had once again shown their lack of patriotic reliability (cf. Crothers 1941). This was combined with extolling the feats of the German soldiers, which were also propagated by the literature mentioned as well as by the official publication of the General Staff, which pointedly was aimed at giving the German people, in accessible form, a palpable picture of the ardu-

ous life of the troops in the field and their valiant behaviour in combat (Kriegsgesch. Abt 1906: iii). In the electoral campaign of 1907 a whole range of movements and organisations that have been termed as new radical nationalism (Eley 1990: chpts. 5-7) coalesced in a crusade directed explicitly against the Social Democrats (cf. Wehler 1995: 1079-80); a glorified image of the colonial war – the official end of which was appropriately declared shortly before election day – played an important role in this quest (cf. Sobich 2004). The propagation of the war, and in fact, the genocide itself, was supplemented not only by the memorial and novel literature mentioned, but also by elaborated and costly stagings, e.g. in circuses, which combined popular images of the gallant German soldiers and strenuous German farmers overcoming treacherous blacks with the image of the exotic (cf. Kirschnik 2002). Finally, it should be noted that there was also considerable, though rather little known resistance to the war, not only in the form of parliamentary speeches, but at a grass roots level as well (cf. Short 2004). All told, so far the circumstance seems to be little understood and accounted for that the colonial war of 1904-08 was actually communicated at the time on a mass scale. In this way, and, in contradistinction to the holocaust, it seems justified to call it public genocide.

It is certainly true that, at this stage, all this can provide no more than a general direction and an informed hypothesis. However, it would appear that in these manifold civil society activities, in the routinization of frames of mind assenting to and revelling in what actually amounted to premeditated mass murder and genocide, along with many other activities of the radical nationalist organisations, fatal lines of continuity reaching further into German history (Wehler 1995: 1081) may be found even more than along the seemingly more obvious lines of personal linkages or military practice. This line of argument also seems to link up well with Omer Bartov's reasoning (1998) on the kinds of redefinition that created the mental preconditions for Germans to murderously turn on their Jewish neighbours. Still, it would be mistaken to take all this as an argument for levelling down real differences. As attested by the controversies surrounding the recently unveiled Holocaust Memorial in Berlin, dedicated exclusively to the murdered Jews, which is to be joined by a whole range of memorials commemorating further groups of victims, Nazi Germany committed more than one genocide during World War II. On a structural level, some connection of all aspects of these mass crimes that were related to radically changing the population structure in the occupied Eastern territories along the lines of the Generalplan Ost, by mass removals and out-right genocide, with similar projects of settler colonialism seems quite convincing (cf. Zimmerer 2004, 2005), as Kundrus also mentions. However, obviously other forms of genocide involving the killing off or hunting down of select groups within larger populations mainly in Germany itself and occupied Western Europe, while of course equally detestable, should be seen as different in analytical terms. It is precisely in this respect which, of course, is



vital for the constitution and mobilisation of resentment that gave rise to Nazism and its march to power, that we should look for public discourse and its dynamics. It would seem that the image of the colonial considerably contributed to such a trajectory.

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**Reinhart Kössler** is adjunct professor in the Department of Sociology, University of Münster and co-editor of *Peripherie*. His main interests include theory of society and socio-economic development, political sociology, ethnicity, memory politics and Southern Africa.